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U.S. Warships Within Range Of Iranian Missiles in the Gulf

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WASHINGTON, March 19 — The United States has moved warships led by the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk into the Arabian Sea, where they are within striking range of newly emplaced Iranian missiles that threaten the entrance to the Persian Gulf, Pentagon officials said today.

But the officials sought to play down the significance of the move, saying the ships were in their normal operating areas.

The missiles, reported by American intelligence officials to be Chinese-made weapons known as HY-2, have been placed on the north bank of the Strait of Hormuz and on an Iranian island close to shore. From those points, they could hit vessels in the narrow shipping lanes in the center of the strait.

Doubts on Intention of Iran

Middle Eastern diplomats said they doubted that Iran would try to sink a ship so close the strait. They said that would damage Iranian interests more than those of Iraq, which Iran has been fighting for more than seven years.

The diplomats pointed out that Iran ships its oil through the Strait of Hormuz while Iraqi oil is sent by pipeline through Saudi Arabia to the Red Sea or through Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, they contended, the Iranian missiles were more of a psychological than a military threat.

On the other hand, the diplomats said, Iran has long been angered by the financial support that Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations have been giving to Iraq. Much of that support has come from Arab oil revenues, they said.

President Reagan and senior Admin-

istration officials have repeatedly said that the security of the Persian Gulf is of vital concern to the United States, but they have not announced specific measures they would take if the gulf were blocked.

The Pentagon officials said Kitty Hawk and her escorting vessels entered the Indian Ocean at the end of January. Along with several smaller destroyers and frigates operating in the Persian Gulf, the Navy had 17 ships in the region today, the officials said.

The 81,000-ton carrier with a crew of 5,600 carries 85 aircraft, including attack bombers, which have a range of 1,000 miles when armed with a maximum load, and aerial tankers to extend that range.

The warships in the Persian Gulf have long watched American commercial ships and tankers, along with those of friendly nations. Naval officers said it had not been necessary for the warships to escort the commercial ships because all were operating in a confined area and the warships could move swiftly to aid a troubled vessel.

Missiles Have a 50-Mile Range

The Chinese-designed missiles, which the intelligence officials said were based on a Soviet missile known as Styx, have been placed at two points along the strait, the officials said. Some versions have a range of 50 miles and carry a warhead with 1,000 pounds of high explosive just above the surface of the water at subsonic speeds.

The intelligence officials said the positioning of the large, land-based missiles near the mouth of the Gulf represented an escalation in the threat to shipping because they are much more powerful and accurate than missiles fired from aircraft.